

ISSUE BRIEF

Enhanced Defense Cooperation

New Opportunities for US Engagement in the Baltic Sea Region

FEBRUARY 2016 JOHAN RAEDER

A Special Relationship Unchained

Finland and Sweden share a history and cultural relationship spanning more than a thousand years. Their bilateral cooperation covers all aspects of society. Yet when it comes to defense, between the end of the Second World War and the end of the Cold War, cooperation was very limited, if not nonexistent, due to the political realities of the time. Since the early 1990s, however, Finland and Sweden have found themselves increasingly engaged in cooperative efforts to strengthen peace and security. Over the last two and a half decades, whether working separately, bilaterally, or through international frameworks—such as the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO), the European Union (EU), NATO/Partnership for Peace (PfP), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), or the United Nations (UN)—a close and open dialogue between the two countries has been a given. More often than not, this dialogue has progressed as part of concrete efforts to promote effectiveness, efficiency, and common interests. Opportunities for collaboration have not been rare. Finland and Sweden have combined efforts to support Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania within the BALTSEA cooperation.¹ They have provided combined units for peace support operations under the flags of the UN, the EU, and NATO. They have pushed for the development of defense cooperation within the EU, from suggesting that the EU adopt the Petersberg tasks to setting up a Nordic Battle Group. They have been instrumental in developing PfP, from joining together in 1994 to

The Brent Scowcroft Center's **Transatlantic Security Initiative** brings together top policymakers, government and military officials, business leaders, and experts from Europe and North America to share insights, strengthen cooperation, and develop common approaches. Through high-profile public conferences, off-the-record strategy sessions, and content-rich publications, the initiative provides practical and relevant solutions for transatlantic leaders, as they navigate this critical time for the Alliance. This issue brief is part of the initiative's ongoing work on Nordic-Baltic defense and security in the new European security environment.

¹ The Baltic Security Assistance Group (BALTSEA) was a cooperative effort between fourteen Western states to help the Baltic states develop their armed forces.



A Swedish JAS-39 Gripen participates in Exercise Arctic Challenge over Norway in September, 2013. Both Finland and Sweden have been active participants in NATO and NATO members' military exercises to facilitate greater interoperability between their militaries. *Photo credit: US Air Force.*

proposing the creation of the Enhanced Opportunities Program twenty years later.

Taking It to the Next Level: From Cooperation in Faraway Places to Meeting Common Regional Challenges

In February 2015, Finland's Minister for Defense, Carl Haglund, together with his Swedish counterpart, Peter Hultqvist, presented an agreement on how bilateral defense cooperation could be further enhanced.

This development represents a fundamentally new relationship between the two countries when it comes to defense and security policy. Shifting toward a regional focus, Finland and Sweden will continue to make combined contributions to international peace support operations. What makes this agreement special, however, is that bilateral cooperation from now on will rest on the assumption that challenges in the region will be addressed together. In addition to dealing with day-to-day tasks, such as patrolling, surveillance,

and logistical support, activities might, if so decided, also include combined operations to handle contingencies up to and including war. While not entering into an alliance that would obligate them to help each other, the two countries will develop plans for such operations as necessary, complementing existing national plans. This will, in a time of crisis, present Helsinki and Stockholm with the option of acting together or alone.

As a result of this agreement, secure communications between the ministries of defense as well as between the armed forces headquarters have been established. An exchange of personnel between the ministries is also increasingly taking place.

The respective services are tasked with developing the cooperation necessary to support the political ambition described above. The most far-reaching cooperation involves the navies and air forces. More specifically, Finland's and Sweden's navies are developing the capability to conduct combined operations up to the level

of protection of shipping and establishing a Combined Naval Task Force. The air forces are establishing a common air picture through the exchange of information and will be able to conduct combined air and base operations. The armies will be able to set up combined units up to brigade level. All services will be able to rely on the base structures in both countries and will be able to operate and conduct tasks in both territories, operating under the command of either country after a transfer of operational command is decided. The legislative work required to allow and support these activities is underway.

The Baltic Sea Region: Finnish and Swedish Interests

The rationale behind enhanced cooperation comes from a number of converging interests. For many years, engagement for international peace and security manifested itself in strong support for the UN, which led to extensive contributions to international peace support operations. This, in turn, prompted an increase in efficiency and security when conducting such operations, especially after NATO took over peace support operations in the Balkans, with the more robust mandates given by the UN. Working under NATO command in more demanding operations required a higher degree of interoperability and preparations. The continuously increasing costs of military hardware and capabilities also encouraged closer cooperation in acquisition and capability development. Moreover, in recent years, the very ambitious Russian military build-up, coupled with revanchist Russian rhetoric and increasingly aggressive behavior, including against Georgia and Ukraine with the unlawful annexation of Crimea, have made it clear that the security situation in the Baltic Sea region has changed. That this new situation is likely to last for a long time, and that it is something that we have to respond to, is underlining the view that these challenges are better met in cooperation.

Finnish-Swedish defense cooperation contributes to peace and security and does not replace any existing bilateral or multilateral cooperation agreements. Instead, by increasing efficiency in capability

development, Sweden and Finland will be able to increase their contributions to the UN, OSCE, EU, and NORDEFCO, including to operations under UN, EU, or NATO command, as well as to the defense of their own territories. In doing so, they also enhance the security of the Baltic Sea region.

Finland and Sweden share the interests of contributing to upholding global peace and security, the existing European security order, and international law. This includes respect for recognized international borders and agreements, and the notion that armed aggression is a breach of the UN Charter. They take their starting point in the conviction that free and independent states have the right, in accordance with the UN Charter, to

choose how to best provide for their security, whether on their own or collectively. While not members of a military alliance, Finland and Sweden both see NATO as a central actor in European security and believe that a strong and viable NATO, with an ensured capability to uphold its commitments according to Article 5 in the North Atlantic Treaty, is a prerequisite to achieving a Europe that is free, whole, and at peace. They further believe that US engagement and military presence in Europe are long-term strategic interests, necessary for NATO to maintain a credible collective defense capability and to reassure its member states.

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Promoting Security through Engagement and Presence

Consequently, it is in Finland's and Sweden's interest to contribute to security in the region by facilitating NATO's efforts in upholding its responsibilities and by promoting US engagement and presence. This means striving for closer cooperation with NATO, while avoiding taking responsibility for activities that are strictly under NATO's jurisdiction—a line of thinking that coincides with the views of NATO members.

Therefore, Sweden and Finland have developed military exercise activities in the region, providing increased opportunities for deployed forces to participate in advanced and complex exercises. Last spring, for instance, the Finnish and Swedish air forces exercised with units from the US Air Force in Europe stationed

at the Ämari Air Base in Estonia. This exercise built upon the experiences gained from Cross Border Training activities, originally a Finnish-Swedish bilateral cooperation that first expanded to include Norway and now encompasses all Nordic nations and is open to third party participation. Finland and Sweden wish to conduct such exercises on a routine basis, along with units deployed to the Baltic States. This would give units engaged in the less-demanding task of air policing the opportunity to maintain their level of proficiency in air-to-air combat during deployment. The need for Finland's and Sweden's air forces to conduct exercises for combined air operations will thus provide opportunities for other nations, including the United States, to participate.

Sweden and Finland intend to increase exercise opportunities for all services. To that end, the Nordic Defense Ministers have also recently decided to explore the possibility of establishing a recurring Northern Flag exercise. Sweden has a leading role and will work closely with Finland on this task. Sweden and Finland also aim to develop naval exercises, including in the anti-submarine warfare-area, and are looking into developing land and joint exercises along the same lines. These would be open to third party participation, including from the United States.

Finland's and Sweden's increasing cooperation with NATO under the Enhanced Opportunities Program (EOP) also includes efforts to strengthen regional operational cooperation. The two countries are working on implementing Host Nation Support Agreements, which will increase their ability to support NATO-led exercises and operations in the region. Together with NATO, they are developing a dialogue and a habit of cooperation within EOP in a 28+2 format that includes regional security issues. Meetings at the officials level will be followed by meetings at the ministerial level. All of this will facilitate closer cooperation for security in the Baltic Sea region.

The enhanced defense cooperation between Finland and Sweden clearly fits well into the aims and interests of NATO members, including the United States.

US Interests in the Baltic Sea Region and a New Standard for Defense Cooperation

The 2015 US National Security Strategy reiterates the profound commitment that the United States has “to a Europe that is free, whole, and at peace.”² It describes a strong Europe as an “indispensable partner” in “tackling global security challenges, promoting prosperity, and upholding international norms.”³ The United States’ commitment to the collective defense of all NATO members is said to be ironclad, and the United States commits itself to ensuring “the Alliance remains ready and capable for crisis response and cooperative security.”⁴ The United States intends to reassure its “allies by backing [its] security commitments and increasing responsiveness through training and exercises, as well

as [by maintaining] a dynamic presence in Central and Eastern Europe”⁵ with the aim of deterring Russian aggression, remaining alert to Russia’s “strategic capabilities, and [helping] allies and partners” to the United States “resist Russian coercion over the long term.”⁶

At the same time, the US Armed Forces are hard-pressed to meet all of their commitments due to strained resources and emerging challenges. This dilemma requires innovative solutions, including new ways of cooperating with allies and trusted partners. Making better use of existing exercises, using the new exercise formats that are being developed to negate the negative effects of routine deployments, relying on expanded support for forward deployments, and promoting regional security cooperation between allies and partner nations are all ways of conducting defense activities more efficiently. These strategies will help the United States meet its commitments to NATO and promote its interests in the Baltic Sea region.

2 *National Security Strategy*, The White House, February 2015, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

The enhanced defense cooperation between Finland and Sweden thus clearly fits well into the aims and interests of NATO members, including the United States. In a time of increased challenges and stretched resources, a smarter way of developing capabilities and maintaining readiness is a welcome addition to an already comprehensive and fruitful cooperation.

Whether pursuing US interests through developing NATO's Readiness Action Plan, planning for the conduct of Baltic Air Policing, engaging in a political dialogue, developing new doctrines and tactics, supporting forces stationed in Europe, or showing presence and promoting regional cooperation, the enhanced defense cooperation between Finland and

Sweden will provide the US with new opportunities and help develop standards for smart defense. The lessons learned from this work can help to further increase the effect and efficiency of defense cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. At the same time, it can serve as an example for collaboration in other regions, as the defense cooperation between Finland and Sweden has served as an example to others before.

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